

THE ROHINGYA'S SUSPENSION AT THE BORDER: BORDER/LANDS ARE CONVENTIONALLY CONCEIVED AS SPACES OF WAITHOOD AND SUSPENSION. HOW DO PEOPLE ON THE MOVE INHABIT AND POLITICISE THE BORDER?

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to respond to the question of how people inhabit and politicise the border through the case study of the Rohingya refugee crisis. It considers borderlands through Navaro-Yashin's notion of the no-man's land, where people are stuck in a limbo, and Jones's work on how people inhabit borders through their everyday lives. It will first look at how the lack of documentation restricts people, and is one way in which they are trapped within an abstract border imposed by the nation-state. The Rohingya defy this border in different ways, from creating verification cards to marrying into Bangladeshi families. As borders are places of waithood too, this paper moves onto investigating how Rohingya refugees traverse the temporal borders and changing rhythms between everyday life and sudden removal of it. The essay will lastly recognise the vast reality of the situation: many of the refugees die while passing borders and it is their dead corpses that are entrapped in the no-man's land. This paper will also compare the Rohingya refugee crisis to other migration case studies to give an ample understanding of what it means to be in a state of waithood within borders, and also because there has been a lack of investigation of this ongoing situation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION

The space of waithood and suspension can be seen as an unhomely in-between state, a limbo or vacuum that exists, but simultaneously does not, what Navaro-Yashin describes as the no-man's land (Navaro-Yashin 2003). Although he is referring to spaces without a recognised state authority, borderlands can be equally seen as no-man's land for people on the move, as this is where the state imposes its power while trapping people in between, a limbo of being outside and inside the border. Through this notion, I will be exploring the ways in which people on the move inhabit and politicise the border not in their state of waithood and suspension, but rather by breaking free from being trapped in this no-man's land vacuum. Using Jones's work, I will explore how this is done not through political resistance, but rather in the ways that people on the move inhabit their daily lives and the ways that they do not fit binary ideas of border dwellers (Jones 2011). Jones incorporates Navaro-Yashin's notion of no-man's land to explore the way people inhabit these spaces. I will draw on case studies around the Rohingya's move between Myanmar, becoming stateless and their entering Bangladesh; it has been reported to be one of the worst-refugee crises in the world (UN 2018). I will also draw upon other case studies of people in borderlands to see similarities and differences.

It is first key to recognise how borders are assigned to understand how people inhabit and politicise them. Borders are imposed by the state and confine people by defining their legality and identity as being part of one state. They can be asserted through physical barriers or legal documentation (Anzaldua, 1987: preface, Agamben, 1995). They are an expression and measure of state power on one hand, but on the other, they are a mechanism of selective human mobility, in order to choose who can enter the border (Giddens, 1985: 49). Borders are also time imposed in accordance to the issuing of visas and the person's migration status as well as the making and unmaking of nations (Scoot 2009: 7). They are, therefore, susceptible to change according to the sovereign state's decision, as seen through the nationalisation of Yugoslavian countries and Hungary (Denich, 1994). For Jones, borders are not only physical but "also [represent] the division of one identity category from another" (Jones 2011: 694). By enforcing borders, therefore, the state includes certain people within it by excluding others, who are then subjected to the vacuum of no-man's land. It is through everyday actions that people on the move try to escape this land, by asserting their identity and challenging our concept of what we consider the norm.

THE ROHINGYA CASE

Since the independence of Myanmar, the Rohingya have been living in a marginalised state near the border of Bangladesh as they became trapped in between the stabling of the borders of Myanmar. The statelessness of the Rohingya and their subsequent escape to other countries, especially Bangladesh, was caused firstly by the Myanmar Citizenship Law of 1982, which conferred the right of citizenship of 135 nationalities listed by the government of Myanmar, excluding the Rohingya population (Parnini et al., 2013; Uddin, 2015). This drew an invisible line between Myanmar and the Rohingya, leaving a spatial and temporal vacuum as the Muslim minority waited to be recognised as citizens, with documentation. Furthermore, to this date, the Rohingya are not recognised as a separate ethnic group, but rather as Bengali who immigrated illegally to Myanmar during the creation and independence of the state in the transition between British colonial rule and the postcolonial era.[1]

[1] "Erasing the Rohingya: Myanmar's Moves Could Mean Refugees Never Return." Reuters. Accessed December 19, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-rohingya-return/>.

Since 1982, the government of Myanmar has imposed “oppression, discrimination, and forced labor” which compelled 550,000 Rohingya to seek refuge outside of Myanmar, while, more recently, it was reported that “security forces destroyed the homes of the Rohingyas, which led to the latter’s flight,” making half of the Rohingya population flee outside the borders of Myanmar (Uddin, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2012).

DOCUMENTATION, IDENTITY, AND CHALLENGING THE BORDER

If being stationary is seen as the norm, just the act of moving across borders can be read as a way of disagreeing with the government. As discussed earlier, borderlands are no-man’s land, placed in a limbo; Jones argues that it is also where the “performance of sovereignty is often the most visible,” and it is where people who inhabit the border and do not conform to the state-sanctioned categories create a “space of refusal” (Jones 2011: 695). This space of refusal can also be seen as a “grey space” where people are “concurrently tolerated and condemned, perpetually waiting “to be corrected”” (Yiftachal 2009: 251). Just by not conforming to the sovereign established categories, people on the move find themselves in this grey space. In the case of the Rohingya refugees, the state claims its sovereignty by positioning a border excluding this particular ethnic group which locates the Rohingya in the grey space, waiting to be “corrected” into citizens of the country. In this way, they inhabit a state of refusal, not by choice, and wait in suspension, resisting to go back and be subjected to the violence of the Burmese state. Shimul, a Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh, said in an interview with Al-Jazeera that he would not go back to Myanmar until the government provides him and his family with “citizenship, security and the same rights as other citizens.” [2] He, like many other refugees, chooses to remain a refugee and live in the space of refusal to not conform to the violence and unjust ways the state treated him.

Leaving the Rohingya in Myanmar without citizenship is one of the ways in which they are forced to disappear into the limbo of the border, and proving their identity becomes a way of inhabiting the border in order to be recognised as people. To verify their identities, the Rohingya who travel across borders carry a verification card issued by the Myanmar’s government; however, this card is also a reminder that they ultimately cannot assimilate as Burmese citizens as it mentions that “this is not proof of citizenship” (Dhaka Tribune: 2018).[3] Nevertheless, Mr Islam, a Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh, says that he carries his documents everywhere as they are a way of proving that he was a Burmese citizen until he was rendered stateless (Reuters: 2014). The documents that are used to confine him in the limbo between states can also be used as proof of identity and belonging instead through the subject’s agency. Proving one’s existence in a documented form is key to leaving the limbo in between borders. Noor, a Rohingya residing in Kuala Lumpur, is in the process of creating a digital database using blockchains to record her own and other Rohingya’s IDs (Thayer 2018). This becomes a way of challenging the state and its power of constructing borders in relation to ethnicity and nationality; through documentation, self-owning one’s identity.

Another way in which the Rohingya challenge the border is through marrying into Bangladeshi families and assimilating with Bengali culture. Uddin documents a Rohingya girl who married into a Bengali family and now lives with her in-laws away from the refugee camps (Uddin 2015: 73). Marriage becomes a tool of agency to move away from the waithood of the border and inhabit a space on the other side of the borderland. Similarly, Harper and Zubida document cases of Filipina temporary workers who married into Israeli families, which gave them the possibility to extend their stay in Israel (Harper & Zubida 2017).

[2] “Bangladesh: UNSC Team to Visit Rohingya Refugee Camps.” Al-Jazeera, (2018). Accessed December 3, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHhDi-7yo7s>.

[3] In a similar situation, Tawil-Souri describes how the Israeli state issue different coloured IDs for Palestinians which undermines their existence as, because of the colour of their documents, they are treated as stateless in their own country and considered subordinate to Israeli citizens (Tawil-Souri, 2012).

In this case, like for the Rohingya-Bengali marriages, marriage is a form of agency used to break the barrier in between the border of being a temporary migrant into being part of the culture and a resident of Israel. In both cases, the women claim that marriage facilitated their lives, so they are not left in the limbo of statelessness, and it further eased the future of their children (Uddin 2015; Harper & Zubida 2017). Assimilation with another culture and society reintegrates them into another nation through which they cease to live in the vacuum of between borders.

TIME PERCEPTION AND DESTABILISATION

The move from being a refugee or temporary worker into a resident/citizen of a country through marriage depicts a temporal shift as well as a physical crossing of borders. Borderlands are not just a place of waitness and suspension, as people move across them physically and also in a temporal sense. They diverge from normal linear time and inhabit a sense of time that is layered, living in between the past of the home they left and “the new rhythms of the receiving state” (Harper & Zubida 2017: 102). For refugees, this time border is broken when they enter the host country and/or the camps, and they are forced into a new culture and place “with the understanding that there is no return to times gone by and places abandoned” (Harper & Zubida 2017: 102). This inability to move back into the past and the insecurity of the future makes refugees trapped in permanent temporariness (Bailey et al., 2002; Simmelink, 2011). The inhabiting of this space in time, between the past and present, traps refugees in a vacuum, where they are subjected to a paused history rather than a continuous flow of time. Homi Bhabha describes this living beyond the border of time as a space where the present is “no longer a synchronic presence” (Bhabha 2012: 4). People on the move travel across these layers of time although the notion of the present and future to them is skewed. They have to adjust to different understandings of time depending on where they move. The Rohingya traversed the temporal border, becoming stateless the moment Myanmar passed the law excluding them from being citizens. They were thrown into inhabiting another layer of time that differs from the rest of the Burmese citizens. Refugees further traverse the temporal border by adjusting to the timetables and rhythms of the states and refugee camps they inhabit. They rework their lives according to the demands and customs of the new state.

Waiting is seen as normal for irregular migrants and a virtue, thus being stuck between borderlands in suspension and waitness seems to be the only way to be “good” migrants” (Hage 2009; Nyer 2018). While refugees are told to wait in the camps, many break this cycle by moving away from the permanent temporariness of the in-between land of the segregated camps and use this as a form of agency to be part of society. Uddin and others report that many Rohingya escape the refugee camps to work and avoid repatriation to Myanmar (Uddin, 2015; Petersen & Rahman, 2018); they break from the physical border of the camps and the temporal one of waitness. Waiting is seen as a virtue for good citizens, but refugees and migrants often become frustrated with the inability to do nothing and engage in work as “[e]xcessive time can be associated with ‘waiting’, but equally it may be an unproductive, pointless stasis.” (Griffiths, Rogers, Anderson, 2013: 22). Ripon Abrar Hossain, who has volunteered in the refugee camps in Cox Bazar, reports that “many refugees are prompted to work[outside of the camps] to get extra money in order to buy food of their desire. They are not happy with the same bland food they get in the camps everyday.” [4] Having the choice of what they want to eat becomes an agency of reestablishing a sense of identity in the camps. However, the danger of leaving the borders of the refugee camps is that they are more susceptible to exploitation. The only way of finding employment as a Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh is by offering cheap labour and engaging in clandestine works (Uddin 2015: 74). This is a common occurrence between borders; as Jones suggests, the difference in monetary systems and increase in undocumented people makes it easier for “new economic connections through smuggling networks” (Jones 2011: 689).

[4] Hossain, A. Ripon, Interviewed by Miki Quddus, (December 20, 2018).

The body is the only form of agency that the refugee is left with, and Uddin reports that many Rohingya refugees exchange their bodies, through cheap labour, for money (Uddin 2015: 74). Furthermore, their movement in search of employment unsettles the economic situation of the region: Employers prefer the cheap labour, angering the local people and making the Rohingya more excluded from Bangladeshi society.

This destabilization of society has found a similar reaction towards Rohingya refugees in Indonesia, as “[s]ome Rohingya had started to sell their care packages to villagers to raise some cash to buy phone credit, cigarettes, and betel nuts” (Missbach 2017: 52). The refugees make use of the care packages and other resources they receive from NGOs to set up clandestine transactions; it asserts their presence in the borderland. Phiri, working for the UNHCR, indicates that it is their position at the border in between countries and their statelessness that pushes Rohingya into clandestine and illegal activities (Phiri 2008). Living outside of the borders of the state and the border of the camps. This in-between borderline to work and deal clandestine transactions in order to survive. As a result, clandestine activities become part of inhabiting the border; as refugees are associated with living in between borders without forms of documentation, human trafficking, prostitution, and drug trafficking become an easy way to make money to sustain life (Uddin 2015). Illegal work is not just specific to refugees; this is actively pursued by migrants when they are dissatisfied with their working conditions (Harper & Zabida: 105; Nyer, 2018).

HUMAN BODIES: A GAME OF PREY AND PREDATORS

It is key to recognise that a lot of people on the move die in the borderland. The harsh conditions and violence of border control produce many dead corpses entrapping migrants in the land in limbo of the border. The life and death situation is depicted by Andersson through the imagery of hunter and prey, where migrants inhabit the borderland as prey (Andersson, 2014). Like the irregular migrants from sub-Saharan African discussed by Andersson, the Rohingya are seen as prey by the military forces of Myanmar as soon as they cease to be citizens. The images on the New York Times (which reconstructs the Rohingya’s journey across the border to Bangladesh) and Andersson’s case study shows that people on the move can inhabit borders through their bodies only, with no agency as they are ultimately subject to the violence of the border.[5] The dead bodies in the pictures are a reflection of this. Left to their bare life, like Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, these bodies are under no state’s responsibility, inhabiting an empty vacuum land with no agency to move away from it. De Leon portrays a similar picture of migrants from Mexico to the United States where the remains of Mexican migrants are a testament of the violence of borders (De Leon 2015). People are prey not just to the state’s implementation of borders, but to the geographical border itself. The empty bodies foreshadow what will inevitably happen to the prey that lingers at the borderland.

Anthropologists also observed how many people on the move are portrayed as being weak and prey, victims of the stronger enforcement of state laws (Tickin, 2006; Fassin; Haour-Knipe et al, 1996). Tickin discusses how this happened in France in the 1990s, where irregular migrants were granted resident permits if they were suffering from serious medical conditions and were not able to be treated in their home countries (Tickin 2006). As a result, the number of migrants decreased, but the number of migrants who were unwell increased, giving rise to the idea of the “diseased migrant,” as many people exploited their medical conditions or made up conditions in order to gain documentation (Fassin 2011: 221). This shows how people at the border of legality can present their bodies in order to avoid statelessness and irregular status. Although, as Jones argues, it is the state that has the power to “operate outside the legal system if it perceives a threat to its authority” (Jones 2011: 686; Agamben 1998, 2005). In the case of France, the government manipulated the legal system to get rid of any migrant whom they perceived as

[5] “How the Rohingya Escaped.” *The New York Times*, (2017). Accessed December 17, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/21/world/asia/how-the-rohingya-escaped.html>.

a threat (with only the “diseased” ones remaining). Migrants, on the other hand, used this policy as a way to remain in the country.

CONCLUSION

Through these various examples I hope to have demonstrated that borderlands are not just simply places of waitness and suspension; they are places that are hidden from the normality of life, in between the control of the state, but at the same time outside of its reach. Situated in the vacuum, people on the move disappear within the border, becoming what Agamben coined as Homo Sacer. In the particular case of the Rohingya, they become outside of the border, being left in the in-between vacuum where they cannot be part of the one or the other. The sovereignty of the state is what prompted the Rohingya to flee the state, as they did not fit with the government-made Burmese identity. Jones’s work has been insightful to investigate how the Rohingya inhabit the border following Myanmar’s imposed laws, as he looks into the way people on the move inhabit and rework, rather than dispute, borders. Rohingya dwell in the border not by actively resisting the politics of it, but through the daily acts of inhabiting it and establishing their identities in order to resist the force of the borderland. Ultimately, for many, dead bodies, left in between in the limbo of the borderland, become the only way that they can inhabit the border; becoming a reminder of the violence of the border. However, more research needs to be done to understand the case of the Rohingya. Whilst I tackled this through studies of border and state sovereignty, it would be useful to investigate more the identity politics and, perhaps, the way the international organisations and countries are contributing to the state of waitness and suspension of the Rohingya.

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